



## David Lisser

### Hearing from Artists

*David Lisser explores society's hopes and fears for the future through playful experiments with technology, food, and social exchange. After 14 years in the North East, he is now based in Oxfordshire. In 2019, David was commissioned by MIMA and Cleveland Police to create a public artwork for the Community Safety Hub in Hemlington, Middlesbrough. The same year, he showed at MIMA in the exhibition *Fragile Earth: seeds, weeds, plastic crust*. He is in conversation with Olivia Heron, Assistant Curator, in April 2020.*

**OH: Throughout 2019, you worked with young people at Hemlington Linx Detached Youth Work Project in Middlesbrough to develop ideas for a new public sculpture. How did the project unfold?**

DL: The project brief for this sculpture was rather open except for the need to work collaboratively with young people at Linx, and that it should be designed with a 60-year time period in mind to match the expected working life of the new building it will stand outside. Responding to this, I decided to design a series of future visioning workshops that used cooking sessions, card and ball games to bounce around ideas of what 2080 could/should look like, personally, locally and globally.

**OH: What were the key themes that emerged, and how did these shape the development of the sculpture?**



David Lisser (image: Kuba Ryniewicz)

DL: During these sessions, we covered everything from food, flooding, jobs, automation, transport, relationships and human-machine hybridity. Interestingly, a session on future law-making became very complex and nuanced. The young people decided that 'learning chips' or brain implants were definitely going to happen, but that we needed to make sure they were distributed fairly, to avoid driving inequality further.

They also decided, unanimously, that there should be a law against brain 'hacking'.\* This simple statement formed the crux of the entire project, and subsequent workshops went deeper into the practicalities and ethics of transhumanism and how we could safeguard the future of privacy, in particular, the privacy of one's own thoughts.

We decided that the sculpture should somehow act as a monument or memorial to the future of privacy. Finding a form to express this took some searching until I discovered the phrase *sub rosa* or 'under the rose', which is used to describe something held in confidence, or done in privacy. Historically, a rose hung from a ceiling denoted confidentiality, and some confession boxes have carved rose motifs for the same



*Last Ditch Attempt 2018 (image: Janina Sabaliauskaite)*

reason. So the sculpture will take this *sub rosa* form and combine it with excerpts of the young peoples' expressions of hope and warning about the future.

**OH: How do the young people's hopes and fears for the future connect to wider ideas and issues?**

DL: Aside from an almost obsessive focus on being able to drive at over 200mph, the majority of hopes and fears expressed were held by society at large, albeit focused through the prism of youth. There was optimism and scepticism about society becoming fairer, concern about the future of the planet, desire for security and unease/curiosity about how technology will continue to redefine human interactions. I think we can all relate to those. The ongoing privacy of one's own thoughts or intentions is actually being discussed by prominent lawyers and policymakers right now. There is widespread recognition that our use of technology has outstripped our ability to legislate for it, and although this is not how the young people phrased it, I think it's wonderful that they see this problem very clearly.

**OH: Could you reflect on what *Last Ditch Attempt* (2018), your collaboration with Lucien Anderson, uncovered about the importance of informal networks and knowledge exchange?**

DL: *Last Ditch Attempt* was a playful response to the 2016 flooding of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, suggesting an alternative seed-storage solution. We created a mobile seed-library from donated/broken bicycles and a liberated Morrisons trolley, and travelled around dispersing seed capsules to members of the public in North East England.

The flooding of the vault was hyped up in the media. Although melted permafrost did enter the tunnel, none of the seed stocks were damaged. However, it did highlight concerning assumptions that the world's climate would remain stable. Although Lucien and I think that the vault is a good thing, and that safeguarding seed stocks is vitally important, we also thought that putting them in a handful of silos, no matter how secure, was short sighted. Taking inspiration from non-hierarchical systems, we decided to instigate a dispersed seed bank, held by hundreds of guardians. We made sealed plaster capsules filled with vegetable seeds from open-pollinated varieties, likely to grow easily in the North East.

We discussed how we might manage a seed-sharing network, but realised that if we took responsibility for establishing or maintaining connections between seed guardians, the network would be reliant on us, which is

precisely the weakness we were highlighting with the Svalbard Global Seed Vault. We had to make trust integral within the project.

As we cycled around giving out capsules and explaining the project, we were met with curiosity, enthusiasm and gratitude. Some folk were keen gardeners or had family members who were; others simply liked the idea of becoming a seed guardian. It would be naive to think none of the capsules ended up in the bin, but there is also hope in not knowing. I don't think hope and naivety are the same.

Our purposeful lack of control is in stark contrast to the majority of industrial seed sellers, and some of our conversations with people strayed into this area. Although practised by enthusiasts and amateurs worldwide, seed saving is made impossible by large agricultural companies. They use strains that yield very highly in the first year, but will not produce viable seeds for re-sowing. Many farmers have little choice but to enter into punitive contracts with seed companies, and there are instances of farmers being sued for saving seeds.

Although we specifically tried not to track the use of the capsules, through anecdote and happenstance we have found that many people decided to keep the capsules intact, as they were aesthetically pleasing objects in themselves. I even met someone from Rome who was given one by a friend, and it currently sits at her work-desk. So although Last Ditch Attempt is not an academic proposal for worldwide seed storage, we do now know that on shelves, in sheds and on mantelpieces, there are carefully kept seed capsules, full of potentiality and growth.

**OH: Your work *DinnerTime* (2016) takes on new pertinence as we all find new ways to stay connected during coronavirus lockdowns. What did this work reveal?**

DL: I'd almost forgotten about *DinnerTime* until I read this question. For *DinnerTime*, performers using video-link on several iPads joined a large dinner held at Shieldfield Art



*DinnerTime* 2016 (image: Lorna Bryan)

Works in Newcastle. We ate the same food, drank the same drinks, and - initially - had our own places at tables and tried our best to participate with the atmosphere of the evening.

I hoped the work would micro-test promises made by technology about increasing 'connectedness', and its ability to eliminate the barrier of physical distance. Large dinner settings can be great places to share communality but they can also be incredibly isolating. They are a performance in their own right, executed with varying degrees of 'success'.

It was noticeable that after pleasantries were exchanged, the 'screen-guests' became a slight hindrance to physically present guests and were increasingly passed around the table, despite my instruction that the screens stay 'seated'.

One exception was a couple who had conducted much of their early relationship through Skype, who happily had a lengthy, freewheeling and occasionally profound conversation.

In terms of what it revealed, there was no particular surprise in that it highlighted the general preference for face-to-face contact. This in turn sets a challenge about how to socialise with those who are ordinarily, rather than artificially or temporarily isolated. So, in the context of coronavirus, when people (myself included) talk about returning to 'normal', we have to recognise



Untitled (futurebutcher) 2020 (image: David Lisser)

and address the fact that this is normal for a great many people.

I read an interesting post recently stating that the root of ‘curator’ is ‘to care for’, and suggesting that rather than seeking to digitise their collections, museums (as civic hubs) should be finding new ways to re-focus their object-oriented care onto those in their community who need it right now, and to learn how to continue that care once whatever version of normality you recognise is re-established.

**OH: Your work is all about imagining possibilities for the future. What will you explore next?**

DL: I’m currently spending a good chunk of time thinking about the future of the meat industry. I’ve been doing this on and off since 2011. I’m working on a series of sculptures and digitally rendered images, loosely gathered under the working title *futurebutcher*. These are potential tableaux from the cultured/clean/lab-grown meat industry that document the (imagined) shifting use of bioscaffolds, from initially being used to grow recognisable cuts or joints, and subsequently being adapted for novel/sculptural forms of charcuterie or meat.

I understand why the industry has a desire to replicate something familiar as an entry-

point to the market, but also think it is rather unimaginative and uncovers the naturalistic fallacy within the food industry, which states that ‘natural’ is necessarily good. Cooking is constant reinvention, and is littered with non-naturally occurring products. I mean if we can have mint choc chip ice cream, then why not jamón dahlías? I can see those on Masterchef 2025.

I’m utterly fascinated by the potential of the cultured meat industry. If done responsibly, it could have very serious net positive ecological impacts, not to mention a reduction in animal suffering. But I do worry that it is more likely to herald new ways to overconsume, increase the wealth gap and usher in new protectionist and highly nationalistic ‘local’ food policies.

On the subject of the hyper-local, I have been talking to an artist who is interested in growing their cells onto one of my sculptures as a sort of auto-cannibalistic storage process. There are of course myriad technical and ethical issues to address with this, but I am intrigued by this notion of our bodies as sites of production, rather than solely units of consumption.

\*The artist chooses to keep this spelling as it was written during workshops with young people.